

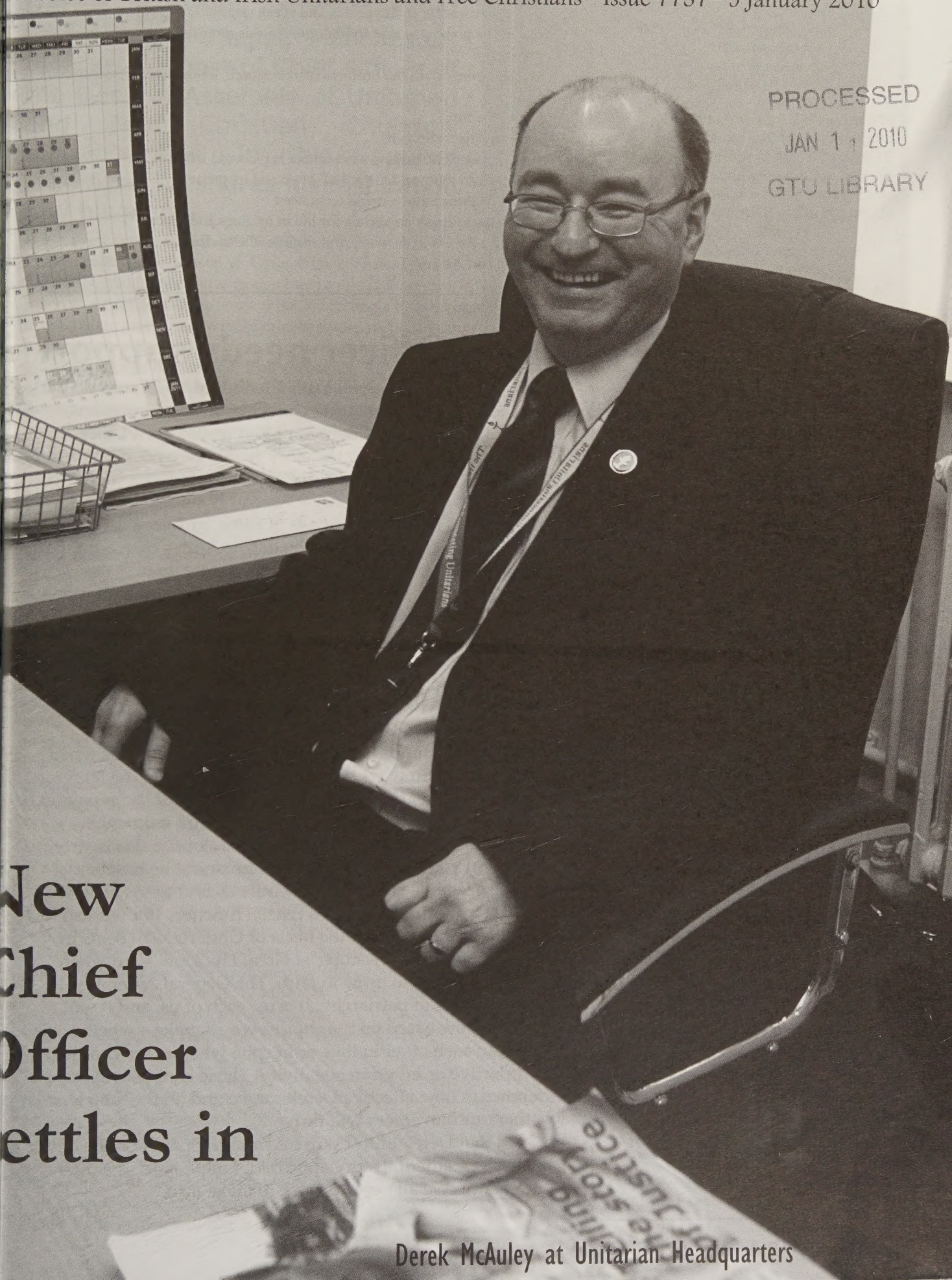
The INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7737 9 January 2010

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New
Chief
Officer
settles in

Derek McAuley at Unitarian Headquarters

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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London WC2R 3HY

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Inquiring Words

Spirit of love and life,
be with us in these moments as we gather to do the business of the day.
May we remember to listen well, and speak clearly,
may we be present to one another here in this time as we are in our
worship.
And gathering to do the business of the church, let us always remember its
work:
to find the lost,
to mend what is broken,
to offer a word of healing where there is pain and trouble,
to speak into the world a word of hope and of peace
a word of justice into a world so in need
and always to speak an alleluia for life in its glory and grace,
an alleluia for life in its worry and trouble, alleluia for all.
Alleluia and Amen

— Rev Dr Linda Hart

Editor's View

Chief Officer needs support

Back in 2006 when I helped Ruth Gledhill of The Times do her story about Chester Cathedral chucking out the Unitarians, little did I know that the denomination would get a Chief Executive out of it. I knew the story would be a good one and I forwarded Ruth the articles I did on the controversy along with photographs of our last General Assembly service in Chester Cathedral and the contact details of some 'ordinary' Unitarians who attended it (unknowingly including Ruth's own aunt, Betty Rathbone of Norwich) so she could interview them.

Derek read Ruth's story and became curious about Unitarians. He did a bit of research and figured out that he had really been a 'unitarian' for years. Eventually he joined Cross Street Chapel in Manchester and has been an active and positive presence in that congregation. Last year, he took a huge step into the big shoes vacated by Martin West as the honorary treasurer to the General Assembly.

Derek's story reminds us that it does make a difference when we Unitarians find ways to get our message out to the larger world. It takes creativity and some expertise, but it can pay off. Derek has become chief executive at a difficult moment.

Our numbers continue to decline and, obviously, this is a challenging financial time. There is no doubt he has the expertise needed but he, and the entire staff at Essex Hall, will need our support. They have a crucial function, but we also need to keep in mind that the heart of Unitarianism beats in congregations, in fellowships, at Great Hucklow – anywhere that people gather to grow in faith. The General Assembly is not some sort of patriarchy. It is us, each of us, and it will wither or grow based on the choices we all make – whether we respond to each other in love or in spite whether we choose to be supportive or mired in negativity. Those choices will make a difference in how effective Derek can be and, in the long term, whether our movement will thrive.

I'm glad that Derek didn't skip his morning paper on the day the Chester Cathedral story appeared. I hope others get that same chance. We all need to work to make it so.

— MC Burns

Chief Officer faces challenges

Derek McAuley, a member of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, took up the post of Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in December. In this *Inquirer* interview, he shares his inspiration and his plans.

What drew you to the job of Chief Officer?

I never expected to end up as Chief Officer of the General Assembly. Making the move from a trustee role in an organisation to a paid position is unusual but interestingly honorary treasurers are most likely to make this change – I suppose their involvement with finance means they know more about the internal workings than most of their colleagues. As a member of the Executive Committee and GA Treasurer as we worked through what we wanted, I became convinced that maybe I had something to offer. I had many of the skills, experience and knowledge required, however, these are not what drew me to the job. I did not seek the post as a managerial challenge. I am a Unitarian and I want the movement to prosper and to provide to many more people what I received; acceptance and freedom to explore questions of meaning in an inclusive faith community. I see the role of headquarters at Essex Hall as important in achieving this vision and decided to apply for the post.

What strengths do you bring to the post?

I have over 20 years' managerial experience leading small teams; 17 years of which have been in the NHS. I have been responsible for personnel issues and substantial management budgets. I am organised and have good project-management skills. I have worked in governance roles; both as a charity trustee and as a board secretary, so I hope to be able quickly to master the wide brief of the Chief Officer. Communication is a significant part of the role and I have worked on aspects of internal and external relations at various points in the past, including with the media.

What are you most optimistic about concerning the Unitarian movement in the UK?

We are a small movement yet have very committed members; without them we could not do all the things we currently do. We are also diverse – as Unitarians and free Christians – and have found ways to embrace and celebrate this diversity. Surely this is what British society in the 21st century needs. Religious, and indeed any other social, movements only survive if they continue to be relevant and I believe that what we offer is increasingly what many people are seeking.

What are the biggest challenges facing the movement right now?

Responding to a changing world yet remaining true to our core values is a challenge to the movement at every level; congregational, district and national. I served on the Hibbert Trust inquiry on the future of liberal religion and we concluded Unitarianism had a future. We are unfortunately weak numerically and we try to do too much with the danger of burn-out for our key activists, lay and ministerial. We need to improve our public profile, which will take a lot of hard work in a media



Martin West (l) retired and Derek McAuley took over as honorary treasurer of the General Assembly at the 2009 Annual Meetings. Photo by John Hewerdine

obsessed with celebrity. Yet what really matters is when the seekers drawn to our message actually cross the threshold at a local church, chapel or fellowship. Will they be truly welcomed and nurtured by the local community? Clearly we have financial problems; however, we are fortunate we don't have to rely totally on 'live' giving due to the generosity of past generations and current donors.

What is Unitarianism's place in the world?

We need to ask ourselves; would we be missed if we were no longer around and the only trace we left was in the history books? I believe we would. Across the centuries we have pushed forward the boundaries of inquiry in matters of the spirit and faith. We have promoted a liberal religious perspective in a world of absolutes. We have embraced scientific discovery and political and social freedom. Yet across the world these values continue to be disputed. Our place must to be stand up for what we believe and support our brothers and sisters who struggle against religious and political oppression. The internet is a great tool for expanding the Unitarian vision across the world. Isn't that exciting!

How do you think the new form of governance is working?

I came into an already existing structure when I was co-opted unto the Executive Committee (EC) and I could see that they had spent a lot of time getting the basics in place and beginning to prioritise, something that the new EC has continued to focus upon. I think the general principles underpinning the new form of governance, as well as the basic structures, are sound. They reflect thinking across the charity sector and, more importantly, our own Unitarian values of interdependence and democracy. 'Power' is dispersed across the various parts of the governance structure. I see my role to work with the Executive Committee to give a strategic focus for the denomination and lead us into what should be an exciting future. One of my personal challenges is, however, to make sure that I create the time and space to think about that future as part of a participatory approach.

Which aspect of the job do you plan to focus on first?

I am very conscious that I don't know all the answers; in fact to be honest I don't even know some of the questions. I have a lot to learn although at least I know some of the context – and

(Continued on next page)

From honorary treasurer to top job



Derek McAuley -- CV Highlights

1981 BSSc degree in Political Science and Economics at Queen's University of Belfast
1992 Certificate in Communications Studies
1992 Joined NHS as Corporate Services Manager, Ashworth Special Hospital, Merseyside
1994 Certificate in health management studies
1997 MA degree in Welfare Organisation and Management at University of Liverpool
2000 Business Manager Adult Mental Health, North Mersey Community NHS Trust
2001 Trustee 42nd Street – supporting young people under stress (Chair 2008-09)
2002 Head of Administration/Trust Board Secretary, Mersey Care NHS Trust
2002 – 2006 National Council Member, Institute of Healthcare Management (IHM)
2003 Deputy Director (Corporate Affairs), Central Manchester Primary Care Trust
2005 Awarded Companionship of the IHM
2007 Congregational Committee member of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester
2007 Assistant Director Corporate Governance and Risk, Manchester Primary Care Trust
2008 Co-opted as Executive Committee member of General Assembly
2009 National Treasurer of General Assembly

Martin West presented Derek McAuley with the General Assembly's books at the 2009 GA meetings. Photo by John Hewerdine.

(Continued from previous page)

even many of the acronyms. For the first six months I have decided that my top priorities are to gain a firm grasp of the key responsibilities of the post, get to know the key people within the movement and to strengthen the management and the capacity of the Essex Hall team. We all need to ensure a focus on delivery of key priorities with a team approach. This is very much internally focused, particularly with the annual meetings rapidly approaching in April. I will get out and about more in the second half of the year and have a number of district visits already arranged.

When did you become a Unitarian? Which congregations/organisations have you been part of?

I am fairly new to the Unitarian movement although like so many of us I discovered I have been a 'unitarian' for a long time before using that term. Before coming across the Unitarian Movement I was very much in the spiritual wilderness for many years. I was well read and thought about a range of spiritual matters. Then one day in early 2006 I read in *The Times* about the Unitarians, their supposed heresy and exclusion from Chester Cathedral. I don't know why this struck a chord with me but I decided to find out more. I went on the internet – as most people do now – and was intrigued. I ordered George Chrystides' book *Elements of Unitarianism*. I decided to go to a service in Cross Street Chapel, Manchester to have a look and I found what I had been seeking. It was a fairly familiar format, yet a challenging environment. I made the journey that so many of us make. In different ways we come seeking and some of us find!

How has your faith influenced your life?

I had what was probably a typical Ulster Protestant upbringing

in the '60s and '70s; Church, Sunday school, Boys Brigade. I was active in the Christian Union at University yet my recognition of my emerging sexuality as a gay person resulted in my rejection of traditional Christianity. I lived a fairly secular life yet the values instilled in me as a child and young person underpinned how I lived. I knew intrinsically to value the individual, that change was possible and that those who benefit from society need to put something back. For example, for 10 years I was a trustee and then chair of a charity for young people with mental health difficulties. These are, of course, values intrinsic to Unitarianism. I have also cherished our spirit of independent thinking and exploration.

Can you give us your Unitarian 'Lift Speech'? What do you tell people who don't know anything about our movement?

I have been challenged by this since my resignation from my health service position was reported at work in an e-mail to our staff of 2500. Many people asked me about my new role. It actually opened up opportunities for some interesting conversations about spiritual matters; I even found one of my work colleagues was a Unitarian who read about my appointment in *The Inquirer*. I tended to say that we are a movement of free-thinkers originally from the radical wing of Christianity and are now open to religious thinking from a range of sources, but that we like to do this as a group rather than as individuals. But that is just my thinking which I am sure will evolve and change.

Derek McAuley is Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

Family-friendly worship manifesto

By David Usher

At the Quarterly Meeting of the London District & Provincial Assembly, held at Rosslyn Hill Chapel in October, Mel Prideaux of Wakefield began by leading us through her thoughts about what made for good family-friendly worship. We then broke into smaller groups, each charged with creating a different element in the service which we then put together and shared with each other. The service was little short of miraculous - funny, profound and moving. One group was asked to write a manifesto for Family Friendly Churches. This is what they came up with.

Tell people we're family friendly... then do what it says on the box!

Ethos:

Act in the expectation that people of all ages will come.

Communication is vital among the congregation, worship leader, families and young people.

Expect that the generations can benefit from speaking to one another.

Have different, not lower, expectations for how children and young people will behave and engage during worship.

Don't stereotype anyone. Allow children the freedom to choose not to be involved: respect individuals and their needs, both adults and children.

Be **enthusiastic!**

Practical Steps:

Baby changing facilities - changing table, bin, supplies

Work with children - imaginatively engage with difficulties such as noise.

Don't talk down to children.

Have resources for children - possibly a children's space or pew bags.

Consider a designated 'families welcomer' with information about children's provision.

Remind the congregation that grandparents and single parents can bring children too

Young adults need a structured programme - consider how to move children from attending Sunday school to attending church.

Consider the role of the sermon - does it need to be content full? Are there other ways of 'doing' worship?

Be sensitive about the content of services if children are present



Have different expectations of how children can participate in worship. Some youngsters played at the LDPA Quarterly meeting. Photos by James Barry

Refreshments - have juice/squash/water and dried or other fruit as well as the traditional coffee and biscuits.

Tell a story whether children are there or not - everyone can learn from the power of stories.

Give adults a chance to learn alongside children and young people e.g. meditation - explaining it to young people gives adults an opportunity to learn!

The Rev David Usher is district minister with the London District & Provincial Assembly.

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The chapel is a beautiful building with a small manse alongside. We employ a full-time Administrator and part-time Music Director. The chapel is active with two Sunday services, children's chapel, a teen group, occasional evening study courses, a choir, social action committee...

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For further information, see

<http://www.rosslynhillchapel.com>

To express interest, please contact

the Rev Dr Ann Peart

ann.peart3@virginmedia.com

Closing date: 11/1/10



The Rev John Harley and Dr Melanie Prideaux spoke at the LDPA Quarterly meeting on family-friendly worship.

'Wonder' a feast for the senses

Unitarian composer **Alan Williams** brought 'Wonder' to BBC philharmonic.

By Carolyn Jones

This explosion of light, sound and colour was a tingling experience in which composer Alan Williams sought to create in sound and imagery the wonder of the creation of the world. *WONDER: A Scientific Oratorio* premiered at Salford University in November. After an introduction by Dr Tim O'Brien of Jodrell Bank, who reminded us that this was the Year of Astronomy, and described the forthcoming work as the union of astrophysics with music, Tecwyn Evans, the conductor of the BBC Philharmonic took the stand and the opening notes tumbled into the air – metallic, sharp, powerful.

The impact of the sound was heightened by two large screens which showed swirling images of shimmering stars, bursts of light, the cosmic web – and above the orchestra floated nine huge planetary balloons of different colours, the light playing over them with the changing mood of the music, representing a solar landscape or 'cosmic garden' designed by David Millard.

The soloists were Siân Menna, mezzo-soprano, whom took the role of Thea, an astronomer, and Stephen Jeffes, a tenor, was her student Marcus, and they were accompanied by members of the Salford Choral society and the BBC singers. This was contemporary music with grandeur of scale and imagination and many influences, with adept use of resources, including some surprising percussion effects, and even some swinging jazz rhythms to accompany the swirling clouds illustrating the beginning of life on earth.

The oratorio traced the various stages in the creation of the universe, with solos alternating with choruses and separated by orchestral interludes, with the two giant screens showing close-ups of the musicians but mainly amazing images from the Hubble telescope and reconstructions of cosmic events – sunspots, solar flares, black holes, galaxies and nebulae – the sheer scale of the universe as depicted was indeed a veritable source of wonder.

This was a feast for eyes, ears and emotions; the images from the Hubble telescope were awesome and thrilling and a fitting accompaniment to the music. The final sequences of the piece



Well-wishers greeted Composer Alan Williams at the premiere of 'Wonder'. (Left to right) : Jane Williams, David Williams (Alan's parents). Christine Best, Frank Potter (Alan's father-in-law), Alan Williams, the Rev Penny Johnson and Ken Johnson. Photo by Carolyn Jones

described the appearance of life on earth – images of insects, plants, forests, then observatories, the canopy of the heavens and the stars, and man floating in space and then standing on the moon, his footprint in the moon dust... finally, to crashing chords, a shot of the earth receding into space, to infinity.

Alan is, of course, well known to Unitarians in the North West as his parents David and Jane Williams were members of Dunham Road Unitarian Chapel, Altrincham, for many years before moving to London. Alan is now Reader in Music at Salford University and attends Oldham Unitarian Chapel. This work was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 in conjunction with the BBC Philharmonic. The librettist was Philip Goulding who undertook extensive research in astrophysics and cosmology to create this work. Alan says that the original idea came from his father, David, who is now Emeritus Professor of Astrophysics at University College London. He, with Jane, was in the audience together with several local Unitarians. It was a most memorable evening and a privilege to hear this unique world premiere in such atmospheric surroundings.

Carolyn Jones is a member of Dunham Road Unitarian Chapel, Altrincham.

Book celebrates Channing Unitarian School

By Alan Ruston

It may surprise some readers that there is a public school for girls, Unitarian in foundation, which the daughters of Unitarian ministers in particular have attended over generations. It was founded in 1885 at Highgate in North London by the Rev Robert Spears and Emily and Matilda Sharpe as a school where students could obtain 'a first-class education that would enable them to go to any university, if they so desired, and yet at the same time fit them for all the work of a woman's home life.'

To celebrate its 125th anniversary an attractive publication has appeared which is absolutely filled with photos from the past, mostly in colour, combining a brief history with recollections from former pupils and staff, reflecting their days at Channing and its influence on their lives. While it soon took in a wider group of pupils than Unitarians the school has the tradition that religious education teaching is supplied by a Unitar-

ian minister, which is provided today by the Rev Sarah Tinker of Essex Church.

As the current headmistress Barbara Elliott writes in the introduction, 'The Unitarian foundations of the school still hold true: Channing continues to educate the whole individual, with its emphasis on inclusion and respect.' While the Unitarian boys' public school at Willaston in Cheshire closed in the late 1930s, Channing School named after William Ellery Channing whose picture is to be found on page 6, has gone on in strength but as is shown here has maintained its original Unitarian traditions.

Channing School: A Chronicle of 125 Years 1885-2010, edited by Carolyn Postgate, Catherine Budgett-Meakin, Alison Burns and Isabel Raphael, 56 pages, ISBN 978 0 9563033 0 1. Price £12.50, including postage and packing, from Nicole Sharman, Channing School, Highgate, London, N6 5HF.

Pagan Unitarian roots run deep

By Yvonne Aburrow

Many people think that the Pagan or Earth Spirit element in Unitarianism started around 1980 with the foundation of Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans in America (CU-UPs). In fact, it has its roots in some much earlier developments. Michael Servetus, often regarded as the first Unitarian martyr, decided on the unity of God in part because he had been reading Hermetic texts, according to Earl Morse Wilbur, author of a history of Unitarianism in two volumes.

The Hermetic texts were a loose compendium of Platonist and Neo-Platonist texts from late antiquity – the last days of the ancient pagan world. Certainly some pagan thinkers of antiquity such as Socrates insisted on the unity of the Divine. Another notable pagan thinker of late antiquity was Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, who pleaded for religious tolerance for pagans in the face of Christian intolerance: 'Everything is full of gods. Whatever men worship, it may fairly be called one and the same. We all look up to the same stars the same heaven is above us all the same universe surrounds every one of us. What does it matter by what system of knowledge each one of us seeks the truth? It is not by one single path that we attain to so great a secret.'

Sounds quite Unitarian, doesn't it? Paganism is generally tolerant of different viewpoints because most Pagans believe that everyone has their own unique path to walk, and that there is a vast array of deities. Unitarians are tolerant because they tend to believe that everyone's experience is unique and different religions are different perspectives on the same underlying reality.



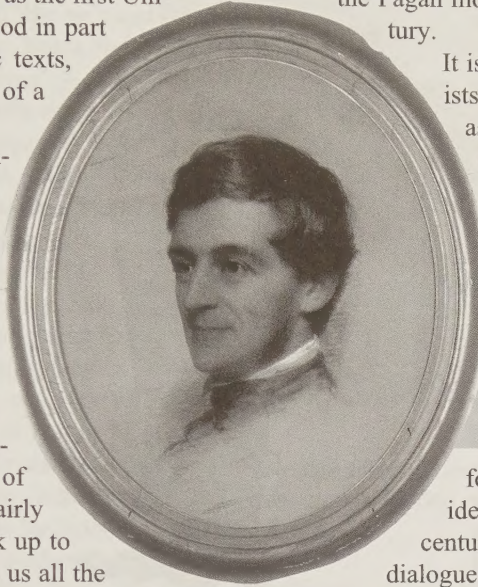
Gertrude von Petzold used similar language and concepts to that of esoteric Christians.

When Unitarianism in Britain officially began, it was not long before it attracted the attention of one Iolo Morgannwg, who had earlier written a huge collection of material for the nascent Druid movement, and went on to become a Unitarian minister and to write many of the hymns used in the Welsh Unitarian hymnbook.

At that time ancient druidry was thought to have been a debased form of the Hebrew religion, brought to Britain by the Phoenicians, so it is hardly surprising that Morgannwg became interested in Unitarianism.

Nevertheless, the Druid movement, of which he was one of the founders, has evolved into the modern Pagan Druid movement. The most obvious way in which Unitarianism has influenced contemporary Paganism is through the Transcendentalists a group of Unitarians from New England. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who began the Transcendentalist movement, had

read the writings of Rammohun Roy, and was deeply influenced by them. Emerson's own writings were widely read, and he became friends with Walt Whitman, who corresponded with Edward Carpenter no relation of Mary Carpenter, a gay Pagan socialist vegetarian whose writings were influential in the Pagan movement at the beginning of the 20th century.



It is probably because of the Transcendentalists that Paganism has so often been referred to as a Nature religion according to Chas Clifton, an American scholar of Pagan Studies. Most Pagans and many Unitarians believe that the Divine or deities are immanent in the world, an important prerequisite

Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists influenced modern Paganism. Portrait of Emerson by Eastman Johnson, 1846.

for treating the planet with respect. Esoteric ideas were quite common among late 19th century Unitarians. For instance, Unitarians had dialogue with the Theosophists and some of the

writings of Unitarians such as Gertrude von Petzold used similar language and concepts to that of esoteric Christians, occultists and neo-pagans of the period, which suggests that they were in contact reading each other's writings, and perhaps corresponding or meeting. When the Unitarian chalice symbol was chosen in the 1940s, it was intended to reflect both

the altar flames of ancient pagan Greece and the communion chalice of the Hussite movement, a Protestant group founded by Jan Hus, who gave communion in both kinds – bread and wine – to his congregation. Previously the laity were only allowed to receive the bread. So, pagan and pantheist ideas have been in circulation in



Michael Servetus, often regarded as the first Unitarian martyr, decided on the unity of God in part because he had been reading Hermetic texts,

Unitarianism since it began. They are not a recent introduction, but an integral part of Unitarian engagement with the world, because both Paganism and Unitarianism are world-affirming.

Yvonne Aburrow is a member of Frenchay Chapel, Bristol

'Origin of Stresses' offers evidence

Review: **The Spirit Level**

By RG Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

By **Seth Jenkinson**

This is a very remarkable book. If the underlying science is true, it is a paradigm shifting thesis, like evolution or germ theory. In essence the authors assert that they have evidence that many of the ills of modern prosperous societies, from obesity and drug abuse through teenage pregnancies to violence and bulging jails all have a common cause; income inequality.

This is a ground-breaking assertion because it renders large areas of political discourse irrelevant. David Cameron's broken society and Gordon Brown's suggestion of hostels for teenage mothers both need the same solution, a more equal society. Indeed the evidence is so powerful that it implies that *unless* we can achieve more equal societies other nostrums will not work, thus the redundancy of much present political discussion.

I have known about Wilkinson's work on inequality and health for at least 20 years but the thesis is now enlarged into other measures namely; levels of trust, mental illness (including drug and alcohol abuse), life expectancy and infant mortality, obesity, children's educational performance, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates and social mobility.

Clearly, in unequal societies the poor suffer the most, but another intriguing assertion, with evidence, is that there is a fine stratification of disadvantage which permeates society to the very top. This also has been known for many years in the narrower field of medicine from Marmot's well known Whitehall study. This present book broadens the canvas dramatically and shows that rich people in unequal societies are less healthy and happy than the top layers of more equal countries.

In the 19th century, cholera came roaring out of the slums to affect even the middle classes, so once the germ theory was understood, clean water and good sewage disposal became a benefit for all. The poor benefited the most, because they died the most but everyone benefited. The analogy today is that as criminality, antisocial behaviour and dependency costs bubble up out of the poorest areas of cities, everyone's life would be improved by more equality.

This is a rich country analysis. No-one doubts that the lives of people in poor countries can only be improved by economic advance. There is however a turning point (maybe \$20000 per-head per-year) after which further increases in wealth are not accompanied by improved social statistics. The richest and most unequal country of all, the USA, passed this turning point decades ago, and further increases in its wealth have only produced a violent society with a huge jail population where the middle classes hide behind security locks in gated communities. The book is a devastating critique of the failure of the US version of market democracy which has dominated the world since 1945.

The Spirit Level

Why
More Equal
Societies
Almost
Always Do
Better

Richard
Wilkinson
and Kate
Pickett



There are other ways to ride the capitalist beast. The Scandinavian countries and Japan, at the egalitarian end of the spectrum, exemplify two very different ways. The researchers are also able to show the effects of inequality *among different US states*. This is extraordinary because it shows how powerful the effect must be if it can be detected between states whose culture and wealth vary so little. The differences between New York and New Hampshire are far fewer than the differences between Portugal and Sweden yet the parameter of *inequality* still predicts all its malign effects.

This book deserves the widest discussion. In a nod towards the illustrious predecessor of 1859, I think it could be subtitled *Origin of Stresses* by means of unnatural inequality. The authors also speculate in a very interesting way at the end of the book on the biological plausibility of human beings functioning better in more equal societies.

This book is nothing less than the scientific underpinning of centre left politics. Therein lies its weakness because the conclusions have been asserted by liberal lefties for more than a century, and this could be thoughtlessly dismissed as more of the same. But it isn't. The important thing is that here is EVIDENCE. Once you have evidence that swallows migrate to Africa in the winter, you no longer have to speculate, as Doctor Johnson did, about them hibernating at the bottom of lakes. The old discourse is dead. Doubters may find it hard to accept that the only ASBO we need is more equality. It may seem as improbable to them as a tiny bird flying to Africa, it just happens to be true.

Seth Jenkinson lives in Bradford.

The Spirit Level

By RG Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Hardcover: 265 pages

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ISBN-13: 978-1846140396

REYD material is available

Howard Hague has managed to catalogue and archive previous worship and Religious Education and Youth Department (REYD) material dating from 1959 – 1986. This includes themed services, much of it aimed at or involving children. Unfortunately none of this material is in digital form, but the authors include some hallowed names – Fred Ryde, Derek Smith, Keith Gilley, Bruce Findlow – to name but a few. If you would like the catalogue as an email attachment, or would like to make an appointment to view the archive, please contact Howard hhague@unitarian.org.uk (020) 7240 2384

– Adrienne Wilson, Worship Panel

Review: 'Religulous'

Laughable – but not the way it intended

By David Morgan

Is religion ridiculous? All of it, equally, from Scientology to Greek Orthodoxy? Is it pointless to distinguish good religion from bad, or obvious charlatans from people of integrity? Film director Larry Charles (he of 'Borat' and 'Bruno') and stand-up comedian Bill Maher certainly think so; hence their feature-length satire-cum-documentary 'Religulous' – now out on DVD. No more subtle than the clunking title is the DVD cover artwork, in which the Three Wise Monkeys are decked out as a rabbi, a bishop and an imam. (Hang on, fellas – comparing an Orthodox rabbi to a monkey? Isn't that the sort of thing the Brownshirts were doing in the '30s? And this becomes OK if it's done in the name of 'Reason and Progress'?).

Bill and his camera crew go hopping from Salt Lake City to the Vatican, from Stonehenge to a 'Holy Land Experience' theme park, on a crusade to make religious believers look stupid. To this end, Bill largely shuns the ordinary folk you'd meet in your local church any Sunday, in favour of extreme and exceptional cases: from 'ex-gay' minister John Westcott, to fundamentalist US Senator Mark Pryor (lulled into declaring, 'You don't have to pass an IQ test to be in the Senate!'), to anti-Zionist rabbi Dovid Weiss, to avowed second-coming-of-Christ José Luis de Jesús Miranda. The desire for the bizarre-at-all-costs was clearly the motive for retaining the tedious non-interview with the cannabis-smoking 'Rev' Ferre van Beveren of Amsterdam, which should have got the chop in the editing suite.

There was a good and worthwhile film to be made here, but this isn't it. Whenever the discussion is in danger of getting genuinely interesting, it's cut off with a joke, on the assumption that our attention spans have expired. 'Religulous' sacrifices nuance, depth and fairness to the cause of trying to be funny, and yet doesn't even always manage to be so.

Is the film's point to criticise those who fail to live up to their beliefs (a case of glasshouses and stones if ever there was one), or to criticise the beliefs themselves? Bill never makes up his mind, now attacking the Catholicism of his childhood, now treating Vatican astronomer Father George Coyne as the voice of sanity in order to confute fundamentalist Ken Ham. Does Bill condemn Dutch MP Geert Wilders for calling Islam



Poster and DVD cover art for 'Religulous' show three monkeys representing clergy of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths.

'violent', or does he think the same thing himself? He seems to want to have this particular cake and eat it. When Bill says he went to the Vatican 'hoping to interview the Pope, or a cardinal, or the Flying Nun or something', it's evidently all too near to the truth as an admission of the vagueness and implausibility of his intentions. (Why not rather try to interview, say, a professor at the Union Theological Seminary? The results might not have been wildly entertaining; but then, neither is this.)

The film closes with lurid footage of nuclear explosions and environmental ruin, overlaid with Bill's dire warnings that we must all 'Grow up, or die!' – that is, repudiate religion so as to save ourselves and our planet. (Er ... so if we all stopped going to Evensong or Friday prayers, there'd be no more cormorants covered in oil?) One wonders if Bill sees the irony of his secular variation on the old message, 'Everyone's got to agree with ME, or you'll all burn in Hell!' Maybe atheism is true, maybe it isn't; but to suppose that the world of today urgently needs the atheists to get organised as one more self-righteous faction, ready to call everyone else fools and liars, is certainly not proven by anything we see here.

At one point, Bill's accomplice, heard off-camera, says, 'I've got this great pitch for a movie: a space-man zaps a virgin who gives birth to a son who's also him, and who then goes on a suicide mission!' Anyone who thinks this an apt summary of the central tenets of Christianity will no doubt declare 'Religulous' to be excellent. Meanwhile, I suspect thoughtful atheists, who have some respect for opinions with which they differ, will be deeply embarrassed to see their case being made so badly.

David Morgan is a member of Golders Green Unitarians.

'Religulous', dir. Larry Charles; Momentum Pictures / Lionsgate / Thousand Words LLC; 2008; 96 minutes; colour.

Available on DVD: VFD27467 / MP806D.



John Readett and friends played a folk music gig at Park Lane Chapel Heritage weekend. They are (l-r) Geoff Millins, John Readett and Terry Bailey. The photograph which ran with the original story in the 14 November Inquirer was of a different chapel celebrating Heritage Weekend.

Letters to the Editor

Ministers seek GA commitment

Open Letter to the Chief Officer and the Executive Committee:

We, the undersigned ministers and students for the ministry, write to express our hope that as a new start is made that we will see positive changes in the staffing for the support of ministers and congregations.

At the 'Supporting and Valuing Ministers Day' held on 26 November in Manchester, Peter Soulsby and Derek McAuley told those present that sometime in January 2010, there would be staff time allocated to tend to the critical function of supporting ministers and congregations and that it was hoped that as much as 1 to 1 ½ days per week would be available.

Support for ministry and congregations should be central to the work of our General Assembly. Tasks to support ministers include (among others):

- Tending to the needs of vacant churches (including consultation with them).
- Providing staff support to the Ministry Commission and Interview Panel.
- Monitoring the mentor programme.
- Assisting with inquiries about ministry, recruitment of ministers and shepherding aspirants through the process.
- Supporting congregations and ministers in distress.
- Processing Criminal Background

Checks as well as monitoring legislation and requirements for them.

Considering what is required to help to recruit, educate, support and sustain our ministers, and understanding the needs of congregations in finding and calling a minister, one day per week seems an inadequate amount of time to be dedicated to such an important aspect of our denominational life. Additionally, creating a system whereby these tasks are shared by a group of staff and volunteers will likely lead to gaps in service and at best inconsistent response.

We know what happens when this is not adequately attended to. We have seen the consequences over this last year while the General Assembly has been in transition. Critical tasks have gone undone even with the – deeply appreciated – best efforts of dedicated volunteers.

We believe that the health of our larger movement can best be ensured by the support of vibrant, growing, lively congregations. In that belief, we ask that both our new Chief Officer and our Executive Committee show their strong support for ministers and congregations by restoring adequate professional staff time to these fundamental tasks. Our future depends upon it.

Yours in faith,

Rev David Ayton

Rev Robin Boyes
Rev Celia Cartwright
Rev John Clifford
Danny Crosby, student
Rev David Doel
Rev Austin Fitzpatrick
Rev Chris Goacher
Rev Peter Godfrey
Rev Jeff Gould
Rev Linda Hart
Rev John Harley
Rev Peter Hewis
Rev Andrew Hill
Rev Anthony Howe
Rev Eric Jones
Rev Ann Latham
Rev Lindy Latham
Rev Vernon Marshall
Rev Tony McNeile
Rev Feargus O'Connor
Rev Andrew Pakula
Rev Gillian Peel
Rev June Pettitt
Bob Pounder, Student
Rev Lynne Readett
Rev Daphne Roberts
Rev John Roberts
Rev Maud Robinson
Rev Patricia Shaw
Rev David Skelton
Rev Sarah Tinker
Rev David Usher
Rev Charles VanDenBroeder
Rev Robert Wightman

Unitarian 'youf' have much to say

By Ernest Baker

I read that the recent 'Seniors' Weekend, had the title 'This I Believe'. How I wish I could have eavesdropped on that!

I look forward to the Youth Presentation at the 2010 General Assembly Meetings and would hope to hear something of what moves and underpins the faith of today's young Unitarian people. Young people often disturb: and so they should. Some things never change: the too-ready dismissal of 'youf'; the behaviour of so-called mature adults who seem to think that good manners can fly out of the window where their interactions with young people are concerned; exaggeration and a failure to listen properly and adequately.

I get thoroughly fed up of things I hear about young people in the queue of fellow 'Pass' holders at the bus stop. On the other hand, today's young people can appear as though they couldn't organise 'an ale-up in a brewery', despite the blessing of e-mail and mobile phones, merely parading their assertiveness-trained pig ignorance. I want our young folk to prove me profoundly wrong in this latter caricature!

Five and forty springs ago, i.e. yesterday (!), the GA Meetings in London were electrified by the Youth Presentation, performed at the then Lewisham Unitarian Church. Under the title 'No Thought of the Harvest', a group of young adults, UYPLers and FOY Society members, offered a statement of faith in the form of an act of worship made up of dramatised sketches, readings and original songs around the three themes of Violence, Money, and Human Relationships.

With continuity material loosely built around the poetry of some of TS Eliot's choruses from 'The Rock', they shared their own personally-chosen reflections, culled from sources as diverse as Bernard Shaw's play 'St Joan', Stan Barstow's novel 'A Kind of Loving', Jules Feiffer cartoons, poetry by Wilfred Owen, James Michie and John Betjeman, an extract from 'Third Northcountryman', contemporary newspaper reports, and the writing of American Unitarian Kenneth Patton, echoing the prophet Amos.

We considered the hypocrisies of so-called 'normal family' (Continued on next page)

Giving Nepali children a CHANCE

By Nick Morrice

I went out to Kathmandu under the auspices of 'CHANCE for Nepal', a charity established in 2006 by Barbara Datson from Cranleigh, following a visit which left her feeling shell-shocked by the conditions under which children were being brought up there.

CHANCE stands for Children's Health and Nutrition Care and Education, and two years ago I read an article about it in a local magazine. This led me to become a sponsor of a child at the Triple Gem School in Kathmandu.

In October, I decided to visit the boy and his family, as well as do some teaching at the school.

My 15-day visit was quite an experience. The city itself is a heady mixture of delight and disaster: wonderful temples, architecture and decoration, but all its culture gradually being eroded away by pollution, traffic congestion, over-population and political malaise.

But that said, I did meet some very inspiring people: there was the Buddhist monk, Lama Kondan, who runs the school with a kind of Chaucerian cheerfulness; the retired English couple from Chippenham who have launched into a second career working for the United Mission to Nepal; the painter of Buddhist Thankas, by name Om, who ekes out a living as a shoe-shine and insisted on calling me Pappa; Chittra, the son of a witch doctor, who discovered Christianity in his late teens and now conducts baptisms in mountain streams; and the widow who left the family home to her five sons and daughters-in-law, only to set up an orphanage for five more 'sons'.

I went on hair-raising motorbike rides through the streets of Kathmandu, had a haircut that turned into a massage, recited 'All the world's a stage' with a class of 15-year-olds, and



A Nepali boy is taken to school by bicycle. Photo by Nick Morrice

preached, twice, to a congregation of evangelical Nepalese.

This is a taster of my extraordinary fortnight, and I would be delighted to share it in more detail with you. I would be happy to do a fund-raising talk and slide-show on the trip. Barbara's charity is worthy of support, so please have a look at the website: www.chancefornepal.org.

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Listen to the winds of their spirit

(Continued from previous page)

life', with its exclusion of those 'beyond the pale', and in attitudes to teenagers, prostitutes, and mental illness, together with forgetfulness of 'the lonely'... Yes, and we worked in 'Where have all the flowers gone?' and 'We shall overcome!'. Preparation was quite hard work!

The 'show' featured a 'typical Unitarian' seeker and sceptic, in contradistinction to each other.

Where are they all now? Well, quite a few are still around! Some of us are still living on, and commitment-inspired by, the tremendous (as in the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of Rudolf Otto!) deep faith impact of the ideas we explored and the 'magical' occasion we shared.

Sometime around this era we British Unitarians published 'Unitarianism - A Faith with a Future'... but there were many voices wondering whether we might have any future at all... of more than about 10 to 15 years. Yet here we are, almost a half-century later; chastened yes, 'reduced' yes, but with, thank God, a new-found deep confidence in our enduring worth and role in society, as guardians of truth, reason and conscience, all surely 'expanded' in conception now, but resisting disappearance into the new credulity, superstition and supernaturalism with which humanity is increasingly and tragically assailed.

I have found myself thinking of the occupations aspired to

by us all in those days: teaching, social and probation work, nursing and midwifery, the ministry; not the Law, accountancy, or, for God's sake, *anking! ('Media studies' didn't exist!) Perhaps our young people of today would share with us their aspirations, and their reasons.

The motto then might be a motto now for getting on with the necessary everyday work of Unitarian ministry, amid all the fine talk of 'Future Ministry', 'Engagement', 'RE', etc., etc.

Take no thought of the harvest,

But only of proper sowing;

And faster than you might think it

The seeds of new life are growing;

So trust the rain and the bright sunshine

And winds of the spirit blowing.

However, are we any longer capable of truly recognising the 'winds of the spirit blowing'? I am all for good management and healthy change, sign of dutiful commitment, often falsely opposed to spirituality. I am firmly against 'management/change ideology' which has '...forgotten all Gods except usury, lust (for which read ego, not sex) and power', as TS Eliot expressed it... back in the 1930s.

The Rev Ernest Baker is a retired Unitarian minister.



'What a load of Rubbish' was a great weekend

'What a Load Of Rubbish' was the theme for the Junior Weekend in October. We spent the weekend recycling items into new ones and making musical instruments from scrap household items which we then used to create our own X-Factor presentation on the Saturday evening.

During our weekend we were interested in hearing about composting from Ben who is one of the Nightingale Centre staff. Ben has ambitious plans for a cottage garden at the centre and we were pleased to hand over a collection of the remainder of our Tuck Shop money to enable him to purchase a fantastic composter, the photo is of us handing the money we raised to Ben.

When we go to Hucklow in February we are hoping to hear how Ben has developed his ideas and hopefully support him further with his endeavours.

There were 30 children aged 7 to 11 and we hope to have a completely full weekend next time which is 5-7 February. The theme is 'The YOU Factor'! For more information or to download a booking form, go to: <http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/events.shtml> For non-admin enquiries about the weekend contact Louise Shatliff on 0161 280 3577. Or, write to the Rev John Harley at jharley@unitarian.org.uk

— Louise Shatliff



Dot Hewerdine (standing) chair of the Denomination Support Commission, acted as the scribe when members of the Buildings Advisory Panel held a networking workshop at the Nightingale Centre at the end of October. The Panel members are, l to r, Mark Pearce, Marion Baker, and David Warhurst. photo by Kate Taylor



Every year, the Reading fellowship tries to visit a different Church or fellowship within easy reach of Reading. Last summer, the fellowship visited Richmond and Putney Church where we were warmly welcomed by the Rev Linda Hart and all of the congregation. Linda gave a memorable sermon based on a story of a 'pocketful of rocks' and then we shared a pot-luck lunch. We then went to spend the afternoon at Kew Gardens. The weather was kind to us until late in the afternoon, raining while some of us were up in the treetops on the treetop walk.

— Submitted by Sarah Benfield